

# FROM PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION TO INTEGRATION

STRATEGIES TO AVOID EARLY DERAILMENT

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*with*

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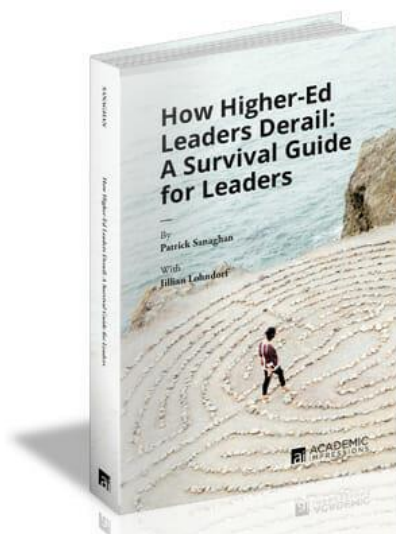
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- **Mary Hinton.** Current president of The College of Saint Benedict (MN).
- **Ron Nowaczyk.** Current president of Frostburg State University (MD).
- **James Lytle.** Former superintendent of the Trenton, NJ school district and professor of practice, the University of Pennsylvania.
- **Nicholas Rashford S.J.,** President emeritus, Saint Joseph's University.

We are grateful.



## FROM PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION TO INTEGRATION



# OVERVIEW

## Why So Many Abrupt Presidential Exits?

*“Ample evidence suggests that many presidential transitions are untimely, poorly managed, personally disappointing, and in some cases, even demeaning for the primary players.”*  
—Moore & Burrow, 2001

The authors have studied and written extensively about presidential transitions and derailments (please see the Appendix for this research). Two of us have experienced several of our own presidential transitions. And we have talked with hundreds of our presidential colleagues over the years.

We have witnessed many elaborate, convoluted, and drawn out search processes that attempted to involve almost everyone “collaboratively,” often with very mixed results. We have concluded that way too much time, attention, and money is invested in the search process. The search process must go beyond a “replacement strategy” and begin to focus on the *integration* of the new president into campus life.

It is our contention that though the search process is important in selecting a new president, it is merely one

component in a larger *integration* process that will make or break a presidential tenure.

*“In any given year, almost 25% of all institutions will experience presidential transition activity.”*

—Millard, Miles & Zimpleman, 2015

There are hundreds of presidential transitions taking place every year, and many go quite well. But there are many that don't. Trachtenberg and his colleagues looked at one year (2009-2010) and found 50 premature exits of presidents. Other researchers (Rowh, 2017; Longmire, 2010; Thompson, 2010; Harris and Ellis, 2018) have identified scores more of these *public* derailments. We know that many more are hidden from view, yet the “spectacular” ones that crash and burn are the only ones we hear about in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or in *Inside Higher Ed*. What happens with many of the other quieter failures or derailments? What can we learn from these? More importantly, how can we prevent them?

We have uncovered some hidden dynamics that need to be understood by higher education governing boards and other leaders if we are going to prevent these derailments and actually integrate our new leaders successfully into our campuses. In this book, we want to clearly identify where transitions go wrong and offer some strong and somewhat counterintuitive recommendations on how to avoid these often-predictable derailments. The primary purpose of this book is to challenge and expand the way presidential and executive searches are traditionally done and help institutions move beyond replacement and transition events into a strategic and intentional process and period of presidential integration.

There many explicit reasons for these early exits—including a strained relationship between the new

president and board chair, a cultural mismatch between the campus culture and the new leader, dysfunctional senior team dynamics, poor communication skills, arrogant leadership, a poor relationship with the faculty, or misaligned goals (Trachtenberg, Kauvner, and Bogue, 2016; Thompson, 2010; Harris, 2018; Mendoza, 2014; Rowh, 2017; Sanaghan, Gaval, Riccio, and Titus, 2017).

### ARE MANY TRANSITIONS FORCED?

E.K. Fretwell, in his excellent monograph *The Interim Presidency* (1995), found that 15% of presidential transitions are “forced”—even though the public picture seems rather pleasant. The university may have announced to the public that President Smith’s “family issues” or health concerns are the motivation for an early exit or that the president wants to pursue other “opportunities.” Surprisingly, we found in our confidential interviews with over 50 sitting and former presidents that at least 1/3 to 50% of presidential exits are, in fact, “forced” exits (Sanaghan, Goldstein, and Gaval, 2009).

In our research and our conversations, we realized that something important was missing from presidential transitions. The transition planning is mostly logistical. It typically includes the listening tour, creating a communication plan, holding “meet and greets” with departments and divisions, meeting with alumni, posting information on the campus website, the installation ceremony, and many other important details. We don’t mean to downplay the importance of these logistical details; they do need to be implemented well, because so much is at stake in a presidential transition.

But, we found that the thoughtful and strategic *integration* of the new president was the part that was often missing from the entire transition process. It seems that once the president is selected, and once the logistical transition takes place, it is assumed that everything is OK—and good luck going forward.

Although there are scattered pieces of advice about leadership integration throughout the available research on transition, so far in higher education we have lacked a coherent approach or framework to the presidential integration process. We propose that it is in the *integration process*, that most of the transition problems await. If we are to prevent presidential derailments, then the integration needs to be explicit, strategic, well-executed, and monitored and owned by campus leaders, especially by the governing board.

## 3 Challenges to Integration

Meaningful integration doesn't happen all by itself, nor by luck or just by lots of good will. The integration process is fraught with risk and deeply fragile. If the first year doesn't go well, the new president rarely recovers, and an early exit is in the cards.

We see three big integration challenges that every new president is faced with:

### 1. Context—Beyond the Org Chart

The new leader has to quickly and accurately learn about the complexity and intricacy of how the campus *actually* operates. Although briefing books can be a helpful

resource in understanding the manifest organization (internal and external structures and processes), briefing books often overwhelm the new leader with too much detail and information. And how things actually work (the politics and dynamics of the latent organization) is rarely captured accurately in a briefing report, which typically portrays everything as being in perfect order, sequential, and easy to follow.

So how does a new president get “educated” about how her new institution actually works? How do they become a *student of the game* without looking clueless, misinformed, or worse, foolish?

## 2. Culture

Every new president has to learn about the unique culture of the institution, with its history, traditions, politics, lived values, and “the way things are done around here.” Understanding campus culture *deeply* will enable the new leader to lead effectively. Furthermore, if the new president doesn’t connect with the campus culture, or worse, appears to be a “cultural mismatch” (Sanaghan, Goldstein, and Gaval, 2009; Rowh, 2017), derailment starts to happen.

We could write an entire book on the power of organizational culture, *especially* campus culture with its complex and intricate history, longstanding traditions, implicit values, hidden politics, stories, legends, and mishaps. The bottom line here is this: If the new president doesn’t “get” the campus culture rather quickly, they will step on people’s toes, inadvertently offend stakeholders, unintentionally show disrespect, miss early opportunities, and look rather lost.

Unfortunately, there is no “culture handbook” or map of the territory. So then, *how* do you figure out all this complicated culture stuff?

### 3. Relational Capital

Every new president needs to build the “relational capital” and trust necessary to actually lead their new campus (Goldstein and Sanaghan, 2009; Sanaghan, Goldstein, and Gaval, 2009; Trachtenberg, Kautner, and Brouge, 2016; Harris, 2018). Without authentic and trusting relationships with campus stakeholders, especially with the senior team (Rowh, 2017) and board, the new leader simply can not lead the institution.

So how do you build *authentic* relational capital as early as possible, so that people trust the intentions and character of the new president? Where’s the workbook for that?

#### DEFINING “DERAILMENT”

There is an excellent book on presidential derailment by Trachtenberg, Kautner, and Bouge, *Presidencies Derailed: Why University Presidents Fail* (2016). It is one of the rare and honest sources that describes some of the hidden dynamics of presidential derailment. The authors define a “derailment” as a presidency that lasts three years or less. (This does not include exits due to health challenges.) We highly recommend this book.

These three embedded challenges go way beyond the important logistics of the transition process, but if you



don't pay strategic attention to the *integration* process, then the work done in transition won't matter much. The reason so many presidential derailments occur is that the focus of the search process is *search and replace*, rather than on giving careful attention to the integration of the new president.

## About the Strategies in This Book

Most of the recommendations and ideas about integration that we will share are focused on integrating first-time presidents, but many veteran presidents have also found these strategies very helpful as they sought a second or third presidency. You will find that many of these strategies can also work with other senior leadership transitions (e.g., provosts, deans, etc.).

Each presidential transition is different, saturated with complexity and threatened by unique and dangerous minefields. There are no silver bullets or detailed, linear plans that ensure a safe leadership passage. Each integration process has to be thought through carefully by those leaders and individuals who are responsible for these important and fragile transitions, because they are fraught with peril. This responsibility begins with the governing board that is responsible for hiring, supporting, and evaluating the president.

Some readers might wonder if we are a “tad” over the top about these tenuous transitions and destructive derailments. We are not. We have seen too many. We have interviewed many leaders and heard their derailment horror stories. Given the current state of disruption in the

higher education environment, we believe that these presidential derailments will continue to come at breakneck speed.

To add to the complexity of these transitions is that the smallest actions (or inactions) may not immediately present themselves as recognizable “points of derailment”—but over time, these small and early missteps build up and can reach a public breaking point that often comes as a surprise to a new president.

Some of the recommendations and suggestions we will provide are for the new president and for the board. Board members and, in particular, the board leadership hold a vital and unique role in the leadership *integration* process. Unfortunately, we have found that too many boards are only *somewhat* involved in the search and transition process and are rarely engaged meaningfully in an integration process.

We believe this has to change, because the board must be invested in and committed to the integration process and success of its new president. Unless the board wants to risk an early and inelegant exit by their new president, they have to pay attention to their president’s search, transition, and integration process throughout the first year and beyond.

A derailed president stamps a stain on the reputation of a college, a stain that becomes part of the history and lore of the institution. It doesn’t go away and can cast a shadow across the institution for many years. Going forward, it also creates a challenging hurdle for attaining high-quality future leaders. Who wants to follow a failed presidency? Anyone good?

Presidential transition is also a historical time for the campus, where traditions are revealed through significant, highly visible, and elaborate ceremonies. Multiple communities are engaged, and institutional values are highlighted. In short, it is a significant and crucial event in the history of every institution.

These leadership journeys really matter to thousands and thousands of people both on and off campus, even across entire cities and regions. To ensure the success of the college, these transitions need to be done well, and that will only happen if we take a deep dive into *where they go wrong* and create effective strategies *to increase the likelihood of success*, given the powerful dynamics at play.

## **From Search and Transition to Integration: How This Book Is Organized**

Here is a quick roadmap highlighting the four sections of this book and the Appendices.

### **Section A**

**We will review the hidden dynamics of the transition process.**

In this section, we will discuss:

1. The “dance” of the search process, where everything is portrayed in positive optimistic terms, and

2. The *seduction of the leader* dynamic that every leader needs to understand—and the special challenge of stakeholder “goodwill” towards the new president.

## Section B

**We will provide some practices and protocols for managing the learning curve of the new president. How do we make the new leader smarter, faster?**

The initial months of a new presidency can be overwhelming for the new leader. There are hundreds of people to meet, exhaustive briefing reports to read, and relationships to build. How do you find the time to actually learn what’s really important? If not managed well, the initial months can be a blur, and a new president can feel like they are in an enduring whitewater without a lifeboat. It is important to appreciate and manage the pace and volume of work, particularly in the early days.

This is especially daunting for first-time presidents. First-time presidents not only need to learn the context, culture, and relationships of their new institutions, they also have to learn how to become a president. This takes time and intention and is a critical dimension of the integration process.

In Section B, we will provide some very different, even counterintuitive ways to “teach” the new leader, so that they will begin to understand the complexity and culture of their new institution quickly.

For example, we will offer the following practices in the learning journey of the president:

1. The “Strategic Audit” Report.
2. Organizing a Presidential “Teach In.”

3. A 60-day confidential “check in.”
4. The Future Challenges Report.
5. Getting an Executive Coach.
6. Using a Financial “Coach.”
7. Making the “Listening Tour” more strategic and reflective.

## Section C

**We will suggest some strategies to build the “relational capital” that the new president will need in order to lead their new institution.**

We believe that the relational part of the integration process is essential to the new leader’s successful integration. We offer several “different” integration strategies that many new presidents have found helpful:

1. A counterintuitive, initial senior team discussion.
2. A conversation with “cultural travelers.”
3. Creating a Learning Network.
4. Organizing a senior team retreat early in the game.

## Section D

**We will also cover some of the embedded and “sticky” challenges of the integration process.**

We'll address questions like:

1. What do you do with the fragile and important relationship between the president and Board chair?
2. What happens if an “insider” was a candidate for the president’s job and still remains on the senior team?
3. What do you do with the president’s spouse/partner?

## Section E

**We will propose a bold initiative to take the next step in preventing presidential derailments.**

This book is a powerful resource, but if we are going to address this pervasive problem, we are going to need a lot more investigation into the specific causes of presidential derailments. The field of research on this is unfortunately very thin. In this closing section of the book, we will propose the creation of an Integration Summit and an Integration Task Force to conduct national research into this issue and recommend practical strategies for ensuring successful presidential integrations across the country.

## Appendices

In the appendices, we will provide the following:

1. A calendar for utilizing the variety of practices and protocols we suggest in the monograph. We have recommendations for the:

- a. Preboarding Phrase
  - b. The first month
  - c. The first six months
2. Some diagnostic questions for the “Listening Tour.”
  3. An informal model that organizes our recommendations and strategies into two major categories:
    - a. Strategies that support the new leader’s learning process.
    - b. Strategies that help build relational capital for the new president.
  4. Advice for “managing the twilight” and ensuring that the previous president exits well. This is an important part of the presidential transition that is often neglected.
  5. Some last thoughts and advice for new presidents.

We will again offer some strong and counterintuitive suggestions and advice. This advice may be different from your expectations, and we hope that leaders who are responsible for effective presidential transitions will consider these recommendations carefully.

Aspiring presidential candidates should pay attention to this advice as well, because these suggestions are based on the painful experiences of hundreds of current and former presidents. You can utilize many of these strategies before you come onto your new campus.

# Transition vs. Integration

## Defining the Transition Process

We don't want to confuse transitions with integration, so we want to highlight the important differences. In our view, the *transition* process is usually supported by a credible transition team made up from a cross section of campus constituencies, some of which can come from the search committee to ensure coherence and continuity (Sanaghan and Goldstein, 2008; Sanaghan, Goldstein, and Gaval, 2009).

They are often tasked with the important logistics of a presidential transition, such as:

1. Creating a “tour” for campus stakeholders to meet the president.
2. Establishing a communication process that keeps multiple stakeholder groups informed.
3. Providing summaries of campus issues, culture surveys, even creating a briefing book.
4. Making sure that the “ground rules” between the outgoing and incoming president are adhered to.
5. Managing the orientation of the new president (e.g., assemble the learning network; identify the cultural travelers; summarize the Future Challenges report).

*We will describe these integration strategies later in the book.*



## Defining the Integration Process

We believe that campus leaders need to create an effective **Presidential *Integration Team (PIT)*** with a competent and highly credible integration manager/chair (Sanaghan, Goldstein, and Gaval, 2009; Sanaghan and Goldstein, 2008; Gaval and Sanaghan, 2018). They need to be given the release time, authority, and resources to design and organize an integration process that fits your culture and context. Cookie cutter approaches and generic checklists will miss the mark. We recommend seeking outside counsel, preferably from a search firm who employs integration practices, to train, orient, and equip the PIT manager/chair or co-chairs.

This is not an “add on” responsibility for faculty or staff with an overwhelming workload. It’s not something you somehow “find the time to do.” It is a strategic priority that needs the very best people shepherding the process, especially throughout the first year.

We would strongly suggest that a highly credible and well-known faculty member and trusted administrator co-chair the Presidential Integration Team (PIT) and even be given the “release time” to focus on managing the entire integration process.

The integration process goes beyond the logistics of stakeholder communications, media notifications, the endless meets and greets, and meeting with alumni (the “tour”). For example, it is not about meeting everyone in the first 30, 60, or 90 days. Integration is about meeting the right people at the right time for the right reasons and making sure the new president is ready and equipped for these meetings so that these meetings advance the institution. It is critical to focus on the Office of the

President as much as it is to focus on the president, all for the sake of the institution.

<b>THE INTEGRATION PROCESS: A FRAMEWORK</b>
<p><b>Search Prep</b> Develop search profile</p>
<p><b>Search</b> Search committee</p>
<p><b>Transition</b> Search firm w/ integration services</p>
<p><b>Onboarding</b> Form PIT</p>
<p><b>Feedback &amp; Evaluation</b></p>

First, this process must involve both building and nurturing the *relational capital* and credibility that the new president will need in order to actually lead the institution. This process must be both intentional and strategic. If the relational capital doesn't get established and nurtured, if the new president's credibility isn't established, then good luck. But who does this? How does it happen?

Secondly, the learning curve for the new president needs to be managed strategically, so that they learn quickly what they really need to know and don't get overwhelmed with an avalanche of information and other important "stuff"

that is coming at them with breakneck speed. This is especially true for first time presidents. Because first time presidents are learning how to be presidents, in addition to learning the institution, it is difficult to know what to pay attention to. So they often pay attention to everything and everyone. This is not sustainable. A new president, any president for that matter, only has so much time and energy in a day. It is critical to focus and prioritize that time and energy quickly through the integration process.

We have found through our interviews that a transition and integration process, when done well, *can easily take a year.*

Creating the pathway for this journey takes some real thinking and hard work on the part of dedicated, organized insiders who know their campus well and have a deep affection for it.